

The impact of COVID-19 related isolation on the mental health of Alzheimer's disease caregivers: Where does communication technology fit in?

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 lockdown and social isolation protocols implemented to slow the spread of the virus created a unique environment of separation between individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) and their informal caregivers. The health and wellness of dementia caregivers has been shown to be affected by the challenges of their caregiving role. Yet the inability to fulfill these roles may exude equally detrimental health outcomes. Furthermore, the impact of communication technologies such as smart phone and tablet apps, is not yet fully understood. This study investigated the mental health outcomes of ADRD caregivers in the wake of widespread COVID-19 related social isolation, and the influence of app use on these outcomes.

Method: Caregiver perceptions were gathered via a web-based survey (available in both French and English). Inclusion criteria included: self-reported status as a dementia caregiver, 18 years of age or older, and ability to read either English or French. Survey data was analyzed via descriptive statistics and specific variables of interest were investigated deeper via principal component analysis and ordinal regression model analysis.

Result: A total of 84 complete surveys (67 English, 17 French) were collected. Of these, 80% reported that their loved one was isolated due to some form of institutionalization or hospitalization. Furthermore, 87% of respondents reported that they experienced negative mental health outcomes related to either experiencing, or worrying about isolation from their loved one. Using no or only 1 smart device application was significantly associated with increased likelihood of negative mental health outcomes for the caregiver.

Conclusion: These findings highlight the need for methods of mitigating the negative effects of physical separation in periods of health and safety-related lockdowns and isolation. Furthermore, the potential alleviating effect of increased technology use was indicated by the increased risk of health concerns with less app use as compared to more app use. Future studies should further investigate the extent to which various smart personal device applications can facilitate care provision at a distance.